

The Bookshelf by the Fire.

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VI.

John Evelyn's Diary.

It is good to think that John Evelyn's *Diary* is not yet a forgotten book. Mr. Austin Dobson's noble edition,¹ though it is to be feared that it brought small gain either to editor or to publishers, was issued in 1906; in 1907 the *Diary* was included in *Everyman's Library*, with a preface by Mr. George W. E. Russell, and reprinted in 1911; and still more recently Mr. T. R. Glover has made it the theme of one of his pleasant essays in *Poets and Puritans*. To the student of seventeenth-century life and literature the book needs no introduction; it is a contemporary document of inestimable value for his knowledge of that period. But it is much more than this, and its rich human interest gives to it a much wider appeal. Of course it is sometimes dull, as diaries are wont to be in which all manner of trivial things find a place. But if the reader is sometimes bored with what he thinks the wealth of unnecessary detail, especially in the account of the author's 'grand tour' in the first volume,² he has the remedy in his own hands; he can turn the page confident that it will not be long before his interest will revive. And indeed, when we remember that Evelyn began his diary when he was a mere child and continued it to the last month of his long life, the wonder rather is that the dead pages in it are so few. Evelyn, it must be remembered, with all his many gifts, was not a man of genius; and though, on occasion, when he is moved beyond his wont, his style rises to an eloquence which is the more impressive because of its gravity and restraint,³ in the main it is, though always clear and straightforward, without distinction. The interest of the book for us to-day lies mainly in this, that it enables us to read the history of a

large part of the most stirring century in our long national annals through the eyes of a typical Royalist gentleman of the best sort, intelligent, grave, upright, and God-fearing.

I.

John Evelyn was born at Wotton, near Dorking, in Surrey, in 1620; he died and was buried in the church there eighty-six years later. Merely to recall the monarchs under whom he lived is sufficient to remind us how momentous were the days in which his lot was cast. When he was born James I. had still five years to reign. The reign of the first Charles, the great Civil War, the Commonwealth—all had come and gone by the time he was forty. He saw the return of the Stuarts, the second Charles and the second James; he saw their final downfall at the Revolution which set William and Mary on the throne; and he had still four years of his long life left when Queen Anne began her reign.

We have a no less striking index to the character of Evelyn's century in the famous events of which he was an eye-witness and his *Diary* is the record. Never wavering from youth to old age in his Royalist sympathies, he notes the opening of the Long Parliament as 'the beginning of all our sorrows for twenty years after.' He was present in the great Hall at Westminster to hear the trial of Strafford, and again on Tower Hill to see 'the fatal stroke which severed the wisest head in England from the shoulders of the Earl'—'to such exorbitancy were things arrived.' Eight years later Charles I. suffered the same fate, but Evelyn, too horror-stricken to be present at such 'execrable wickedness,' 'kept the day of his martyrdom a fast.' Another twelve years and the wheel had come full circle: 'This day,' writes Evelyn, on January 30, 1661, '(O stupendous and inscrutable judgments of God) were the carcasses of those arch-rebels Cromwell, Bradshaw (the judge who condemned His Majesty), and Ireton (son-in-law

¹ Published by Macmillan in three vols.

² The references throughout are to Mr. Austin Dobson's edition.

³ See, for example, the passage on the death of his son Richard (Jan. 27th, 1657-8), and again on the death of Mrs. Margaret Godolphin (Sept. 9th, 1678).

of the Usurper), dragged out of their superb tombs in Westminster among the Kings, to Tyburn, and hung on the gallows there from nine in the morning till six at night, and then buried under that fatal and ignominious monument in a deep pit; thousands of people who had seen them in all their pride being spectators. Look back to October 22, 1658 [the day of Cromwell's funeral] and be astonished! and fear God and honour the King; but meddle not with them who are given to change!' Evelyn was an eye-witness of the deadly havoc wrought both by the Great Plague and by the Great Fire of London. He notes how, during the former, he was 'environed with multitudes of poor pestiferous creatures begging alms; the shops universally shut up, a dreadful prospect!' His account of the Great Fire, when he says he saw 'above ten thousand houses all in one flame,'—a great sea of fire 'two miles in length and one in breadth,'—is too long for quotation here, but is one of the most vivid bits of narrative in the whole book. Close on the heels of these disasters came the humiliations of the Dutch War, when Evelyn saw what no Englishman has seen since, an enemy's fleet burning and destroying in the Thames itself. But it is impossible to particularize further. The infamy of Titus Oates and Judge Jeffreys, two men of whom it would be hard to say which better deserves to be called the wickedest man in English history; the ill-fated rebellion of Monmouth; the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, with all that it meant for the unhappy Protestants of France; the courageous protest of the Six Bishops—all these, with fifty other famous things of long ago, pass in quick succession before our eyes as we turn the pages of Evelyn's minute and faithful record.

II.

It is always interesting in a work like Evelyn's to note what the writer has to say about his famous contemporaries. Now Evelyn had unusual opportunities of getting to know most of the men and women of his day whom we still care to hear about. Kings and bishops, scholars and saints, poets and politicians, men of high degree and low—he was on terms of easy familiarity with them all. He was one of the first secretaries, and might have been the president, of the famous Royal Society, and he lived just long enough to be elected a member of the Society for the Propaga-

tion of the Gospel in Foreign Parts.¹ And if, as Mr. Glover says, his judgments of men are not very profound, they have at least this value, that they reveal the average mind of the generation.

Evelyn's opinion of Cromwell may be inferred from the passage which has already been quoted. In his eyes Cromwell is simply 'the pretended Protector,' 'the arch-rebel,' 'the Usurper'; he likens him to 'the Apostate Julian'; on the day of his funeral the entry in the *Diary* reads: 'It was the joyfulest funeral I ever saw; for there were none that cried but dogs, which the soldiers hooted away with a barbarous noise.' On the other hand, Charles I. is 'that excellent Prince,' 'our blessed martyr,' whose death was an 'execrable murder,' to be expiated by an annual solemn fast and day of national humiliation. The return of Charles II., 'after a most bloody and unreasonable rebellion of near twenty years,' makes 1660 for Evelyn the *annus mirabilis* of English history.

The references in the *Diary* to seventeenth-century men of letters are disappointingly meagre. We get a glimpse of Thomas Hobbes, the famous philosopher of Malmesbury, with whom Evelyn twice tells us he was long acquainted, but nothing is added to our knowledge either of him or of his 'pernicious doctrines.' Mention is made occasionally of 'Mr. Dryden the poet' and of his plays, but again, beyond a lament over the licentiousness of one of these, and a scornful allusion to Dryden's reported conversion to the Church of Rome,—'no great loss,'—he has nothing to tell us. Another page records the diarist's visit to 'that famous scholar and physician, Dr. T. Browne, author of the *Religio Medici*, now lately knighted,' whose house and garden at Norwich, 'being a paradise and cabinet of rarities,' filled him with delight. To Milton, though Evelyn and he were contemporaries for more than half a century, the *Diary* has but two brief allusions, and these must be given in full:

'24th October [1663]. Mr. Edward Phillips came to be my son's preceptor; this gentleman was nephew to Milton, who wrote against Salmasius's *Defensio*; but was not at all infected with his principles, though brought up by him.'

'2nd June [1686]. New Judges here, among which was Milton, a Papist, (brother to that Milton who wrote for the Regicides).'

¹ The S.P.G. was founded in 1702, the Royal Society in 1662.

The second of these entries, it should be noted, is nearly twenty years later than *Paradise Lost*, and nearly fifty later than *Lycidas*. The truth is, and Evelyn helps us to realize it, that Milton's immense reputation with his contemporaries rested mainly not on his poems but on huge controversial pamphlets of which to-day not one in ten thousand of his fellow-countrymen can tell even the names.

Among all his many acquaintances none seem to have interested Evelyn more than the preachers and divines of his day. He was a most devout and regular worshipper, and notes on the preachers whom he heard, their texts and their sermons, are scattered freely throughout the whole *Diary*. He had of course little love for the Puritans, especially of the Independent variety: usurpers, novices, canters, fanatics — what right had they in the pulpits of the land? But Anglican doctrine and Anglican worship were always dear to him, and most of the Anglican divines of the century—Ussher, Cosin, Pearson, South, Tillotson, Stillingfleet, Jeremy Taylor, Barrow, Burnet, Ken—find a place in his *Diary*. Sometimes too, though he must usually have been what is called 'a good hearer,' and is never fierce except against the Puritans whom his soul hated, he dips his pen in acid, even with an Anglican in the pulpit. 'This worthy person's talent,' he writes of an earl's brother, 'is not preaching, but he is like to make a grave and serious good man.' On another occasion, when he has been listening to a Greek professor from Cambridge, the entry is, 'No great preacher, but a very worthy and learned man.' A sermon of one Dr. Brideoake, Bishop of Chichester, pleased him still less: 'A mean discourse for a bishop.' And how the ears of 'the minister of Althorp' would have tingled if he could have read this: 'Dr. Jeffryes preached the shortest discourse I ever heard; but what was defective in the amplitude of his sermon he supplied in the largeness and convenience of the parsonage house'!

III.

Another no less interesting use of the *Diary* which we may make is to mark the signs of national progress, material, intellectual, and moral, in the years that divide us from it. Here are a few random jottings.

Those who like to mark the first use of now

familiar things may note with Evelyn the introduction into England of coffee and of skates. In this day of huge battleships the eye is naturally caught by an entry like this:

'On the 19th July we went to Chatham to see the *Royal Sovereign*, a glorious vessel of burden lately built there, being for defence and ornament the richest that ever spread cloth before the wind. She carried an hundred brass cannon and was 1200 tons.' And what a different England from ours it must have been when Evelyn could write of Norwich as 'this ancient city, being one of the largest, and certainly, after London, one of the noblest of England'! The Royal Society, as we have seen, was founded in 1662, but science had not yet banished superstition, for only two years before, Evelyn tells us, Charles II. 'began first to touch for the evil,' and he goes on to give a full account of the ceremony.¹ These, too, were the days of cruel 'butcherly sports,'² when murderers were publicly burnt at Smithfield, and prisoners whipped at the cart's tail through the streets of London. But it is perhaps in his pictures of Court life that we see most clearly the change for the better which has come over the social life of England since the days of the Stuarts. Evelyn's language for the most part is very cautious, and we sometimes sigh for a whiff of the hot indignation which blazed out so fiercely against the hated Puritans; but not all his Royalist sympathies could conceal from him the character of the vile, dissolute crew that Charles II. gathered about him in his Court at Whitehall. One short passage, the more striking for the tragic note (not often heard in the *Diary*) on which it ends, may be quoted; it was written on the night of the gay monarch's death:

'I can never forget the inexpressible luxury and profaneness, gaming, and all dissoluteness, and as it were total forgetfulness of God (it being Sunday evening) which this day se'nnight I was witness of, the King sitting and toying with his concubines, Portsmouth, Cleveland, and Mazarin, etc., a French boy singing love-songs, in that glorious gallery, whilst about twenty of the great courtiers and other

¹ See note on July 6th, 1660.

² Evelyn tells how in the Bear Garden at Southwark he 'saw cock-fighting, dog-fighting, bear and bull-baiting. . . . One of the bulls tossed a dog full into a lady's lap as she sat in one of the boxes.' No wonder he adds, 'I most heartily weary of the rude and dirty pastime.'

dissolute persons were at basset round a large table, a bank of at least £2000 in gold before them; upon which two gentlemen who were with me made reflections with astonishment. Six days after, was all in the dust.'

But if in many ways the years have brought a new and better order, in others, the curious reader of the *Diary* will note, it is the thing that hath been that still is. Here, for example, is Evelyn declaiming against the 'mad intemperance' of an age bent on making a bigger London, 'by far too disproportionate already to the nation,' and proposing expedients for abating the nuisance of its smoke! Or take this: 'Set out for Paris. . . . At Dover, money to the searchers and officers was as authentic as the hand and seal of Bradshaw himself, [president of the Council under Cromwell] where I had not so much as my trunk opened'; or this: 'This was the very first suit at law that ever I had with any creature, and oh that it might be the last!'; or this again: 'I went to congratulate the marriage of Mrs. Gardner, maid of honour, lately married to that odd person, Sir Henry Wood: but riches do many things.' How oddly modern and familiar it all sounds! London smoke, tourists' tips, the delays of the law, marrying for money; as it was in the beginning—verily, there is nothing new under the sun.

IV.

I have left to the last, and with little room to write of it, what for some readers will be the most interesting thing in the *Diary*—the light which it casts on the mind and character of the author himself. Evelyn was a virtuoso of the first water, and lost no opportunity of seeing or hearing any new thing. He had not simply an intelligent man's interest in interesting people, and placés, and things, but—to use Kipling's phrase—a 'satiabie curiosity' for whatsoever things are freakish and odd. A sheep with six legs, and a goose with four; a tame lion whose tongue felt 'rough like a cat's'; a woman nearly seven feet high, and another all covered with hair; the prodigious feats of a famous fire-eater, and of a troupe of performing monkeys at a fair—he is as interested in them all as any gaping schoolboy, and all find a place in the *Diary*. You can almost hear the mischievous chuckle with which he tells how a famous old Scottish

marquis¹ mistook the turtle-doves in an aviary for owls!

But deeper than any other interest in Evelyn's life lay his devotion to religion and to the English Church. He was neither Papist nor Puritan. He took his first sacrament according to the Anglican ritual before he was seventeen, and through all the testing days of the Civil War and the Commonwealth he never for a moment wavered in his affection for the Church of his choice. On his tomb is recorded, by his own desire, his conviction 'that all is vanity that is not honest, and that there is no solid wisdom but in real piety.' To the reality of this conviction the *Diary* is the best witness. His regularity at public worship, his reverence for the Holy Communion, his frequent prayers, his resignation under suffering, his diligent 'trussing up to be gone' as the end drew nigh, and not less than these the *Diary* itself, alike in what it relates and what it omits, are all the marks of a deep and unaffected piety.

Mr. G. W. E. Russell, in his brief preface to the *Diary* in *Everyman's Library*, uses Evelyn to prove that, as Mr. J. H. Shorthouse says, the Cavalier was not invariably a drunken brute, nor were spiritual life and growth the exclusive possession of Puritans and Ascetics. It might, I think, be fairly argued that Evelyn was neither Cavalier nor Puritan, but something of both. In his practical temper he was certainly more in sympathy with a Puritan like Colonel Hutchinson, for example, than with the average Cavalier of the Commonwealth period. But, however that may be, we can assure Mr. Russell that no modern Puritan desires to claim for his spiritual ancestors any monopoly of goodness. Indeed, when one recalls the strange inability of many of those who sit on Mr. Russell's side of the House to do justice to a Puritan of even the intellectual and moral height of Milton, one may wonder if his remonstrance has not been sent to the wrong address. But in this matter perhaps we all live in glass houses, and it were better to throw no stones. On whichever side our sympathies lie, if we read Evelyn's *Diary* we shall all alike give thanks that, in an age when so many had defiled their garments, one man still walked with God in white, even amid the lewdness of the Stuart Court at Whitehall.

¹ The Argyle of Scott's *Legend of Montrose*.